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ABSTRACT

As part of a larger study examining students' attitudes toward schoolwork, this investigation examined the relationship between children's attitudes toward schoolwork and their gender, socioeconomic status, age, school achievement, and school attainment value (the importance they placed on doing well in school). The study also examined the relationship between students' attitudes toward schoolwork and their perception of parental behaviors that support schoolwork. Subjects were 140 fourth- through eighth-grade students in a Roman Catholic school in Wisconsin. Students completed a questionnaire that measured their attitudes toward schoolwork and perception of parental behaviors supporting schoolwork. Analysis showed that school attainment value was the most useful variable for predicting students' attitudes toward schoolwork and their perception of parental behaviors supporting schoolwork. Parents' valuing of and concern for schoolwork and parents' positive feelings about good school performance correlated positively with their adolescent children's attitudes toward schoolwork. (MM)

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Children's Attitudes Toward Schoolwork and Perception of Parental Behaviors That Support Schoolwork

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Running Head: SCHOOLWORK ATTITUDES

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Abstract

The relationship between children's attitudes toward schoolwork and their gender, SES, age, school achievement and school attainment value and the relationship between children's attitudes toward schoolwork and their perception of parental behaviors that support schoolwork were examined. Factor analysis and stepwise multiple regression analysis of questionnaire data from 140 4th- through 8th-grade students showed that school attainment value was the single most useful variable for predicting children's attitudes toward schoolwork and their perception of parental behaviors that support schoolwork. The other variables tended to lose their predictive power in the presence of school attainment value. Parental valuing and concern for schoolwork and positive feelings about good school performance were found to correlate positively with adolelscents' attitudes toward schoolwork. The implications of these findings are discussed.

Children's Attitudes Toward Schoolwork and Perception of Parental Behaviors That Support Schoolwork

The importance of homework to school learning and achievement is widely acknowledged. It supplements classroom instruction and contributes to better student achievement (see, e.g., Walberg, Pascal, & Weinstein, 1985). In a study of the mathematics achievement scores of 28,274 elementary school students from 12 countries, for example, Walberg, Harnisch and Tsai (1986) found that hours of homework per week was one of the most consistent predictors of math achievement. Since homework plays an important role in the academic achievement of students, it appears that attitudes toward homework deserve attention. This is so because one may expect that children's attitudes toward homework would affect their homework performance, which in turn would influence their school learning and achievement. Surprisingly little research, however, has been reported concerning children's attitudes toward homework, and specifically variables that affect children's attitudes toward homework (see, e.g., Chen & Stevenson, 1989; Rickards, 1982). One purpose of this study was thus to determine if children's attitudes toward schoolwork would be related to their gender, SES, age, school achievement, and school attainment value, that is, children's feelings about the importance of doing well in school (see, e.g., Mussen, Conger, Kagan, & Huston, 1990).

Additionally, the relationship between children's perception of parental behaviors that support schoolwork and the five predictor variables noted above was examined in this study. Children's perception of parental behaviors that support schoolwork was examined because it is parental behaviors as perceived by children that help determine exactly what it is that children adopt and internalize as their own to guide their future behaviors, thus becoming their own socialization agents (cf. Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1979). The emphasis here is on children's perception of parental behaviors and their underlying values that they might adopt and internalize to help shape their attitudes toward schoolwork.

School attainment value was used as a predictor variable in this study because one might expect that one's values affect one's attitudes and behaviors (see, e.g., Santrock, 1987) and would be related to one's child-rearing experiences at home. Similarly, one might expect that children's attitudes toward schoolwork would be related to their academic achievement, which, in turn, would be related to parental encouragement and support. Gender was used as a predictor variable because research (see, e.g., Mussen, Conger, Kagan, & Huston, 1990) demonstrated that throughout the school years, particularly in the elementary and high school years, girls tend to outperform boys academically. It would therefore be of interest to determine if girls have more positive attitudes toward schoolwork and more positive

perceptions of parental behaviors that support schoolwork. Age was used as a predictor variable because prior research indicated that as students become older, their attitudes toward school and learning become less positive (Buxton, 1973; Chen & Stevenson, 1989). SES was used as a predictor variable because it was noted (see, e.g., Slavin, 1991) that children of higher SES tend to achieve higher in school and receive greater parental support for school achievement than students of lower SES. Because of these considerations, it was therefore hypothesized that gender, age, SES, school attainment value, and academic achievement of students would be related to their attitudes toward schoolwork and to their perception of parental behaviors that support schoolwork.

Even though studies have shown that parental behaviors are related to children's school achievement (see, e.g., Hess & Holloway, 1984), little research has been reported concerning the relationship between children's attitudes toward schoolwork and their perception of parental behaviors that support schoolwork. Accordingly, a second purpose of this study was to determine if there was a relationship between children's attitudes toward schoolwork and their perception of parental behaviors that support schoolwork. Given that parents are children's primary agents of socialization (see, e.g., Hetherington & Parke, 1986), it was hypothesized that children's attitudes toward schoolwork would be related to their perception of parental behaviors that support schoolwork.

Method

Participants. The participants in this study were 140 students from the 4th- through 8th-grade classes in one Roman Catholic school in an east central Wisconsin city of about 50,000. The students in this school were almost entirely white. In the sample, there were 66 boys and 74 girls, and there were 25, 29, 34, 32, and 20 students in the 4th-, 5th-, 6th-, 7th-, and 8th-grade, respectively. These 140 students were part of a total of 433 Roman Catholic elementary school students from Canada and the U.S. who took part in a larger study on children's attitudes toward schoolwork. The reason why 4th- through 8th-grade students were chosen for this study is that they had been in school for some time and were old enough to understand and respond to the tasks required of them. Roman Catholic school students were recruited for the study because they tend to be a neglected population in research.

Materials. A questionnaire was used in this study. The questionnaire consisted of Likert-type items (e.g., I like doing homework, My parents are interested in what I am learning in school) measuring children's attitudes toward schoolwork and perception of parental behaviors that support schoolwork. The questionnaire also included demographic questions asking participants to indicate their gender, grade level in school, birthday, and the highest level of schooling completed by their fathers and mothers (or guardians). The average of the reported father's and

mothers's education was used to measure children's SES. The participants were also asked to indicate how important it was for them to do well in school using a scale from 1 (not important) to 7 (very important) and also how well they were doing in school using a scale from 1 (very poorly) to 7 (very well). These last two questions were used to measure children's school attainment value and academic achievement (see, e.g., Ames & Archer, 1988), respectively.

Procedure. The study was conducted in the participants' classrooms. The participants were asked to complete the questionnaire anonymously. They were told that there were no right or wrong answers and the best answer was the one that honestly and accurately reflected how they felt. (All statements were read to the 4th-graders since they were younger and might have difficulty comprehending the statements if left to themselves).

Results

The data from all participants in the study were first analyzed using factor analysis. Seven scales with acceptable reliability emerged (Cronbach's alphas for the present sample of 140 subjects ranged from .72 to .90). These seven scales were subsequently used as dependent variables. Four of these seven scales were concerned with perceived parental behaviors that support schoolwork and the other three with children's attitudes toward schoolwork. The number of items comprising each scale ranged from five to 12. These seven scales and their intercorrelations are shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

As can be seen from Table 1, the correlations among these seven scales ranged from a low of .01 to a high of .65, with the great majority of them in the relatively low range. These findings thus suggest that these scales were relatively independent measures in and of themselves.

With regard to the intercorrelations among the predictor variables (school attainment value, academic achievement, gender, age, and SES), school attainment value was found to correlate moderately with academic achievement (r = .57, p < .001). The other correlations among these predictors, as might be expected, were small, ranging from .01 to .24, and they hence will not be discussed further.

Stepwise multiple regression analyses were subsequently performed using the seven scales mentioned above as dependent measures and the five variables noted above as predictors. The results are shown in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

As can be seen from Table 2, school attainment value correlates posistively with two of the three measures of children's attitudes toward schoolwork (homework is important and useful, sense of responsibility for homework and learning). Achievement was found to correlate positively

with "liking homework and school," and age was found to correlate negatively with a "sense of responsibility for homework and learning."

With regard to perceived parental behaviors that support schoolwork, the data in Table 2 show that school attainment value correlates positively with three of the four measures (parental valuing of schoolwork, parental feeling about unacceptable school behaviors, and parental feeling about good school performance). Gender was found to correlate negatively with "parental valuing of schoolwork."

Stepwise multiple regression analyses were also performed using the three scales measuring children's attitudes toward schoolwork as dependent variables and the four scales measuring children's perceived parental behaviors that support schoolwork as predictors. The results are shown in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

As can be seen from Table 3, "homework is important and useful" correlates positively with "parental valuing of schoolwork;" "liking homework and school" correlates positively with "parental concern for schoolwork;" and a "sense of responsibility for homework and learning" correlates positively with "parental valuing of schoolwork" and "parental feeling about good school performance."

Discussion

With regard to children's attitudes toward schoolwork, Table 2 shows that school attainment value correlates positively with the scale measuring homework is important and useful and also with the scale measuring a sense of responsibility for homework and learning. The educational implication of this finding seems to be that to help adolelscents develop positive attitudes toward schoolwork, one needs to help them develop a strong school attainment value.

The finding that achievement correlates positively with "liking homework and school" may be expected because homework and school presents an opportunity for children to perform well, and performing well is self-reinforcing. Children who perform well thus may be expected to like homework and school while those performing poorly may be expected to dislike homework and school. The implication here is that to promote positive feelings about schoolwork, one needs to help children experience success.

As shown in Table 2, age was found to correlate negatively with a "sense of responsibility for homework and learning." This finding is consistent with those of Buxton (1973) and Chen and Stevenson (1989). These researchers found that as students became older, their attitudes toward school and homework became poorer. The exact reasons for this negative relationship cannot be determined from the present study, and further research is thus needed.

With regard to children's perception of parental behaviors that support schoolwork, the data in Table 2 show that school attainment value correlates positively with the scales measuring perceived parental valuing of schoolwork and parental feeling about good school performance but negatively with the scale measuring perceived parental feeling about unacceptable school behaviors. The educational implication of these findings seems to be that to help promote the development of school attainment value in children, parents need to show them that they value schoolwork, feel negatively about unacceptable school behaviors but positively about good school performance.

As the data in Table 2 indicate, school attainment value was the single most useful variable for predicting children's attitudes toward schoolwork and their perception of parental behaviors that support schoolwork. The other variables tended to lose their predictive power in the presence of school attainment value. This finding thus shows the educational significance of school attainment value.

As can be seen from Table 2, girls were found to perceive their parents to value schoolwork less than boys. This finding seems to agree with that of Block (1984). In the study by Block (1984), six independent samples of mothers (N=696) and five independent samples of fathers (N=548) whose children ranged in age from three to twenty years and who differed in ethnicity and SES were asked to respond to the Block Child-Rearing Practices Report. The

results showed that both mothers and fathers tended to emphasize achievement and competition more for their sons than daughters. In a national survey conducted by Hoffman (1975; see also Hoffman, 1977) of over 1500 married women under 40 and one fourth of their husbands, it was found that more fathers and mothers indicated their concern for career or occupational success of their sons than daughters. Both parents also indicated greater desire for their sons than daughters to be hardworking, ambitious, intelligent, highly educated, honest, responsible, independent, self-reliant, aggressive, and strong-willed. Even though both parents indicated the same goal for their sons and daughters, when grown, to be happily married, the goal to be successful and respected in work was expressed far more often for their sons than daughters. These findings thus suggest that males and females are subject to differential parental pressures for achievement. It is conceivable that differential parental pressures on achievement such as those reported by Block (1984) and Hoffman (1975, 1977) predispose girls to perceive their parents as valuing schoowork less compared to boys. Further research is needed to address this issue.

With regard to the relationship between children's attitudes toward schoolwork and their perception of parental behaviors that support schoolwork, the data in Table 3 seem to reaffirm the importance of parental support for children's schoolwork. The implication of these findings is that parents need to show their children that they value and

are concerned with their schoolwork and feel positively about their good school performance. In this way they may help children develop positive attitudes toward schoolwork.

Moreover, as noted earlier, children's school attainment value was found to correlate significantly with their academic achievement ($r = .57$, $p < .001$). This moderately strong relationship suggests that having a strong school attainment value does not guarantee a high level of academic achievement. This finding is hardly surprising given high academic achievement requires many favorable conditions in addition to the belief that school achievement is important. It is conceivable that children who value school achievement do not have the other necessary favorable conditions (e.g., good study skills) that facilitate school performance and they thus fail to perform well. The implication is that it is important to provide children who value school achievement all the necessary support in order to promote their school attainment value and achievement.

In summary, school attainment value was found to be the single most useful variable for predicting children's attitudes toward schoolwork and their perception of parental behaviors that support schoolwork. The other variables tended to lose their predictive power in the presence of school attainment value. Further, parental valuing and concern for schoolwork and positive feelings about good school performance were found to correlate positively with children's attitudes toward schoolwork.

The findings from the present study are especially noteworthy because they were obtained through children's self-reports. This is in sharp contrast to typical studies in which reports were obtained from parents. From this perspective, the present findings suggest that it is important for parents to make clear their values, concerns, and feelings about schoolwork to their children in their effort to promote children's school attainment value and attitudes toward schoolwork.

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Table 1

Zero-Order Intercorrelations Among Seven Measures (N=140)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	---	.45***	-.15*	.25**	.26***	.28***	.30***
2		---	-.05	.10	.59***	.25***	.49***
3			---	-.45***	-.08	.01	-.13
4				---	.17*	.11	.28***
5					---	.51***	.65***
6						---	.44***
7							---

Note.
1. Perceived parental concern for schoolwork (e.g., My parents are interested in what I am learning at school).
2. Perceived parental valuing of schoolwork (e.g., My parents feel school is important for me).
3. Perceived parental feeling about unacceptable school behaviors (e.g., My parents feel bad if I misbehave in school).
4. Perceived parental feeling about good school performance (e.g., My parents feel good if I work very hard in school).
5. Homework is important and useful (e.g., Homework helps me to learn).
6. Liking homework and school (e.g., I like doing homework).
7. Sense of responsibility for homework and learning (e.g., It is my job to finish my homework).

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Table 2

Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis for Students' Responses to Seven Scales

Scale	Predictor(s) (R/Beta)
Students' Attitudes	
Homework is important and useful	S.A.Value (.45***/.45)
Liking homework & school	Achieve. (.27**/.27)
Sense of responsibility for homework & learning	S.A.Value (.47***/.47) Age (.50***/-.16)
Perceived Parental Behaviors	
Parental concern for schoolwork	-----
Parental valuing of schoolwork	S.A.Value (.24**/.24) Gender (.31**/-.19)
Parental feeling about unacceptable school behaviors	S.A.Value (.29***/-.29)
Parental feeling about good school performance	S.A.Value (.43***/.43)

Note:
S.A.Value=School Attainment Value.
Achieve.=Academic Achievement.
Sex coded: 1=Male, 2=Female.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Table 3

Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis for Students' Responses to three Scales

Scale	Predictors(s) (R/Beta)
Homework is important and useful	Parental valuing of schoolwork (.59***/.59)
Liking homework & school	Parental concern for schoolwork (.28***/.28)
Sense of responsibility for homework & learning	Parental valuing of schoolwork (.49***/.49) Parental feeling about good school performance (.54***/.23)

Note:
**p < .01. ***p < .001.